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## Review of *Under the Big Sky: A Biography of A. B. Guthrie Jr.* by Jackson J. Benson

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*Under the Big Sky: A Biography of A. B. Guthrie Jr.* By Jackson J. Benson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xii + 322 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$29.95.

On the Web site of a major bookseller, a "customer reviewer" claims that A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s 1947 novel *The Big Sky* "is really about freedom." Jackson Benson acknowledges the romanticism of Guthrie's writing, but he argues more convincingly that the novel is actually about how "man always destroys the thing he loves." Benson applies this idea to all of Guthrie's work, describing the writer as a Western environmentalist, saddened and angered by his region's history of damage and depredation.

Benson places Guthrie (1901–1991) in the pantheon of writers who have "tried to refute Western myth, to tell it as it was" (naming, among others, Manfred, Cather, and Sandoz). The subjects of Benson's previous three biographies also qualify: John Steinbeck, Wallace Stegner, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark. With the latter two especially, as with Guthrie, Benson concentrated on their writing about changes in the land.

A difference in Benson's latest biography, though, is the considerably shorter length. Not that the account of Guthrie's personal life is cursory. Here Benson is thorough, relying in part on Guthrie's memoir *The Blue Hen's Chick* (1965), and, more, on extensive interviews with surviving friends and family, especially Guthrie's second wife and his two children. We learn of his childhood in Choteau, Montana, of his years as a newspaperman in Kentucky, of his stormy first marriage, his heavy drinking, his more successful second marriage, and the subsequent estrangement from the children of his first.

Benson also attends to Guthrie's writing, but not in as great detail; the book is not primarily an intellectual biography. Still, Benson is at his best when analyzing Guthrie's six major novels and his screenwriting. The pages on the 1953 film *Shane*, for which Guthrie wrote the screenplay, are among the most satisfying.

While Benson repeatedly points to Guthrie's environmentalism, it's not until the last third of the book that he provides substantial analysis to support his claims, perhaps because an environmentalist ethic was most obvious in Guthrie's later work and life. But even so, Benson sees a "stream" flowing through Guthrie's six literary novels, as they dramatize the West's history from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth. According to Benson, Guthrie mourned the "gradual decline in the quality of life in nature through settlement and exploitation." The lament is more than nostalgia, but, as Benson tries to show, the emotional dilemma faced by a thoughtful westerner as he tried to reconcile living on and loving the land.

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